

For Your Information

10/25/2012| By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#), [Mary Ann Glendon](#) and [Robert P. George](#)

The following op-ed appeared in [Roll Call](#) on October 25, 2012.

In the aftermath of the recent controversy over the notorious anti-Muslim film and the reaction to it around the world, now may be the time to step back, view the big picture and consider how best to move forward.

At the height of the controversy, there seemed to be two primary responses to the film. First, there were those who insisted that acknowledging its offensiveness to Muslims necessarily amounted to appeasement of those who commit violent acts or demand speech restrictions. Second, there were others who asserted that robust condemnation of the violence or unwavering defense of the right of freedom of expression must imply insensitivity to Muslims. While both responses were vocal and well-publicized, countless Muslims and non-Muslims alike categorically rejected both stances.

As members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, we find ourselves in a unique position to offer our views. In accordance with its Congressional charter, USCIRF monitors religious freedom conditions abroad, reports on the treatment of people of faith (or no faith) and makes recommendations to the U.S. government on how to deal with abusers of these individuals and their communities. No organization has taken a more consistent or serious stand for the rights and dignity of members of every religious community.

Rooted in USCIRF's work is a bedrock belief in what Article 1 of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims:

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

The implication is clear. All human beings, regardless of faith, should be accorded dignity and respect as fellow seekers of truth who strive to answer the call of conscience.

Those who genuinely embrace this principle rightly recoil at attempts to denigrate the faith of others. They are driven by a passion to defend, rather than a desire to appease. Moreover, they are consistent in their defense of others. While it is impossible to protest against every incident that offends believers, they are willing to stand together with people of all beliefs against those who wound and humiliate through images and words. Consistency is a strong antidote to an appeasement charge.

On the other hand, it is not insensitive to recognize that hateful images and words, while detestable, are an outcome of the right to freedom of expression. Not only is this freedom a pivotal human right unto itself, it is difficult to uphold the freedom to practice one's religion without also allowing the freedom to express one's beliefs. The two rights are bound inextricably together. This realization should lead men and women of good will to use their own right to freedom of expression to counter expressions of hate with those of tolerance in the struggle for hearts and minds in the public square.

Nor it is insensitive to condemn any and all violence perpetrated in the name of any religion as the ultimate assault on human dignity. Rather, to remain silent or to proffer excuses for the violence is to betray the vast majority of Muslims and non-Muslims who abhor the shedding of blood. Being silent demoralizes efforts against violent radicals seeking to hijack faith.

Make no mistake: Hatred and vilification of people and their communities on account of their beliefs is an offense to our common humanity. We must counter it, not by surrendering precious rights or committing brutal violence, but through a ringing reaffirmation of freedom, unleashing the power of our pen, the truth and justice of our words, and the strength of our unity, as we combat the darkness of inhuman hatred together.

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